

## **FUNDING CUTS MAY LEAD TO GANG INVOLVEMENT FOR NATIVE YOUTH**

**Vancouver, B.C: March 9, 2011** – The loss of a successful program will leave many Native youth vulnerable to unhealthy activities and gang recruitment. The Urban Native Youth Association's (UNYA) Aboriginal Youth First (AYF) Sports & Recreation Program will lose all of its federal funding as of March 31, 2011 because the Harper Government no longer sees gang and crime prevention as a priority.

Federal Public Safety Minister Vic Toews recently stated that the government will support projects that work but that he will not speculate about what might be included in the upcoming federal budget; and the Department of Justice website affirms that "Participation in sport, artistic and cultural activities can strengthen a young person's sense of pride and achievement, contributing to increased self-esteem; and fosters a sense of belonging in the community, which can discourage a young person from lashing out against it.... [and] sport, in particular, is associated with a wide range of health benefits." Contrary to these statements, the federal government is choosing to ignore prevention and early intervention in favor of crisis intervention and harsher sentencing for youth.

Despite more than doubling its projected interventions with youth, there has been no indication that there is a chance to save this vital and effective program." says Gray. This year AYF engaged over 300 Native youth, 27 community partners, and 33 volunteers (including 23 youth peer leaders) who have contributed over 2,200 hours of unpaid work to the program. "Many of the youth come to our program as a way to stay connected to peers who are active in healthy activities which helps them to stay focused on staying in school or finding and keeping employment."

AYF offers drop-in, weekly, seasonal, and certified training to youth who would not otherwise be able to afford to participate. Youth have been certified in healthy activities such as jujutsu, snowboarding, tandem canoeing, belaying for rock climbing, swimming, first aid, and snowboarding. Additional activities included running club, healthy eating, basketball camps, dance, hiking, lacrosse, and yoga. Gray notes that "Most youth have never had the opportunity to participate in many of these sports or even been outside of Vancouver's Eastside until they joined our program. Now peer leaders are working hard to mentor younger youth and have provided free workshops to a women's shelters, community centres, and the Olympic Indigenous Youth Gathering."

Gray says "The Government of Canada must act immediately if this vital program is to be saved. The loss of AYF does not just affect UNYA, but the entire Native community as this is the only sports & recreation program for Native youth in Metro Vancouver. I do not know what these youth will do with their spare time once our sports programs are no longer available, especially given the pain and disappointment that they will likely feel towards a government that again let them down by taking away something that they have shown through their ongoing participation is important to them." Gray adds "Our youth need to know that it is more important to the Government of Canada to help provide meaningful opportunities for them to avoid activities that can result in them going to jail rather than to build more jails which will house many more Native youth."

Quotes from youth participants, a youth's parent, the Metro Vancouver Aboriginal Executive Council, and program partners can be found on the next page. Arrangements can also be made to interview these individuals and/or film some of our program activities.

For more info about UNYA, see the attached backgrounder or visit [www.unya.bc.ca](http://www.unya.bc.ca).

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